

CORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

Interview with PETER SCHOTT
Interviewed by Betty King

Peter Schott was active in DC Democratic politics for many years. At various times he was a member of the DC Democratic State Committee, the chairman of the Ward 1 Democrats and a delegate to Democratic National Conventions. He was active in several GLBT political organizations, numerous civic associations and has held office in Americans for Democratic Action. He was appointed by Mayor Barry to the DC Human Rights Commission.

September 15, 2016

BK: Today is September the 15th, 2016. My name is Betty King and I'm talking with Peter Schott about the 1978 mayoral campaign. Thank you very much for participating in our project.

PS: It's a pleasure.

BK: Now, you came to Washington from New York. Is that correct?

PS: That is correct, in 1970.

BK: And you came here for work, or college?

PS: I did not initially have work, but I found work pretty quickly over on Capitol Hill working for one of the committees.

BK: One of the House committees?

PS: Congressional committees, House committees, yes.

BK: Great. And when did you meet Marion Barry?

PS: Probably very early on, because my roommate at the time was somebody I'd known in high school, and he was press secretary for Walter Fauntroy's campaign. [Fauntroy was running for election as DC's first non-voting delegate to the US House of Representatives].

BK: That was 1971?

PS: I guess his election was in '71, so it was sometime in 1970, when the campaign was just beginning.

BK: And who was that who was Walter's press –

PS: His name was Aubrey Zephyr.

BK: And in what circumstances did you meet Marion?

PS: You know, I don't remember the actual time or place that I met him, but it had to be during that campaign. And I also lived very close to where Pride, Inc. was, and he was then executive director of Pride, Inc. [a youth training and employment program].

BK: Yeah, he and his wife, Mary Treadwell, had founded it, and so they were running it together.

PS: That's right. So, very early on.

BK: Now, did you support Walter Fauntroy in his campaign?

PS: Yes.

BK: And then when Marion ran for the school board, did you support him?

PS: I probably supported him for school board.

BK: But you don't remember being terribly active in that campaign?

PS: I don't think I was active at all. I probably focused more on the Ward 1 race [for DC City Council which was in 1974], if there was a Ward 1 race then.

BK: Yeah, I can't remember what the –

PS: Yes.

BK: And then when we got Home Rule, and you got involved in the first election in 1974?

PS: Yes, I would have been involved. I actually, even earlier had – and here is an interesting Marion Barry story. In 1972, I ran for delegate to the Democratic Convention, and I got selected by the people in Ward 1 to be their representative. And the last second, just before we were actually going to have the vote of the whole body, Walter Fauntroy's people approached me and said, "Well, Marion Barry is interested in that seat." So, being a neophyte to DC politics and knowing of the high admiration that Marion was held in, I said, "Well, I guess I can cut the deal." And the deal was that I would go as a youth delegate, because I was young then, twenty-seven. But we went to the hall –

BK: Well now, that was a Ward 1 seat, was it?

PS: It was a Ward 1 seat.

BK: And Marion was living in Ward 1?

PS: He was living in Ward 1 at that time, which is something you may not have known.

BK: That's right, I didn't. So both of you went to the convention in Miami in '72?

PS: Well, I know I went, because when we got to the vote, Marion didn't show. But I think he ended up going as an at-large, probably. I must say I'm a little vague on that as to whether he was a delegate in '72.

BK: You mean when it came time for the vote for the Ward 1 seat? You don't mean that he wasn't at Miami for the convention?

PS: Right. That, I don't recall one way or the other. But when the vote came for the Ward 1 seat – and in those days, you held a ward-wide caucus – when the vote came, he was not there.

BK: I see. So somebody else was –

PS: I think Leola Bynum.

BK: Oh, gosh. That's a name from the past, isn't it?

PS: And I said, since I dropped out, I wasn't going to go back into the race.

BK: Yeah. Now, Leola Bynum, what did she do?

PS: She was a civic activist.

BK: Okay. In Ward 1?

PS: In Ward 1. A housing activist, mostly. I don't even know if she's still around. I haven't seen or heard from her. Well, you don't need this part.

BK: No.

PS: A lot gets cut.

BK: No, we've all lost track of a lot of people. And so, '74 comes along, and you supported Marion at-large for the city council?

PS: Yes.

BK: And then he got a short straw and had to run for reelection in '76. [Members of the first City Council after home rule drew straws for 2 or 4 year terms so the members' terms would be staggered.]

PS: And I would have supported him again.

BK: Tell me about – now we come to 1978, which is the principal focus of our oral history. What role did you play?

PS: Well, I was a member of the ADA board at that time, Americans for Democratic Action, the Washington, DC chapter, which was a very active chapter. We did questionnaires, and it was clear that Marion Barry believed in the same principles that ADA believed in, so we were one of the first groups to support him. I can't, quite frankly, remember

whether I was president at the time, because around that time I became president, or whether John Isaacs was still president. A lot of things, I'm vague on.

BK: Right. We all are.

PS: Yeah, because time has gone by. But I also know that the Stein Club, which I wasn't yet a member of, also was, early on, a supporter. [The Gertrude Stein Democratic Club, a very active and important gay/lesbian club.]

BK: Yeah, they were. I think they like to claim to be the first, but I don't recall who was actually the –

PS: We may have been first, but I don't know.

BK: But you were amongst the first. And during the actual campaign, did you work in Ward 1, or did you work with ADA, or citywide?

PS: I believe I worked in Ward 1. I'm sure I did, with Marshall Brown [Ward 1 coordinator for Barry's 1978 campaign].

BK: Oh, yeah, Marshall Brown was the coordinator. That's right. Tell me about, were you convinced that we were going to win?

PS: It was a very exciting campaign, and it really brought a lot of people out into the open about working in a campaign. Marion had this way of touching young people and bringing them in, and it was like the changing of the guard.

BK: Yes, it was a change election. But were you confident from the first that we were going to win? I mean, there wasn't a single poll that said that Marion Barry was going to win.

PS: No, that's right. I don't think he was even in the lead in any poll.

BK: No. No.

PS: He was never –

BK: I mean, we may have concocted something that was slightly bogus, but there was no serious polls that said that we were going to win.

PS: Yeah, because I think Sterling Tucker [incumbent chair of City Council who was also a myoral candidate in 1978] was the favorite to win at that time.

BK: Yeah.

PS: Was it Tucker? And I forgot.

BK: And Walter Washington [incumbent DC mayor was running for reelection].

PS: Yeah, Walter Washington. It was always – yeah.

BK: And who, besides yourself and Marshall, were the principal players?

PS: You know, I don't remember. I'm sorry. I may not be your best interview on this.

BK: No. Listen, everybody helps. Now, you remember when John Ray aborted his campaign and came over and endorsed Marion?

PS: Right, I do remember that. I was never a big John Ray fan.

BK: No, I know you weren't. But we skip ahead to after the inaugural where the DC Democratic State Committee, of which you and I were both members, was picking a successor to Marion to fill his term until the special election. And you were supporting?

PS: I don't even remember who was running.

BK: Jerry Cooper.

PS: No, I would not have supported Jerry Cooper.

BK: You were supporting Jerry Cooper. Wasn't he from Ward 1?

PS: He was from Ward 1. I didn't even remember he was running.

BK: He was. You were supporting him. I sat next to you to make sure that when you stopped voting for Jerry Cooper you'd vote for John Ray, because we promised John that he could have the seat. (Laughter.) You don't remember that?

PS: I don't recall even Jerry Cooper running in that. And if I supported him, it was only because it was a Ward 1 thing.

BK: Yeah, but I think – now, correct you if you recall this. I think that Dave Clark wanted to run at-large, at the next regular election, not the special election, and that Jerry Cooper was to go – you know, Dave wanted, and some of you Ward 1 folks wanted Jerry Cooper to hold the seat until the next regular election for Dave Clark.

PS: I have absolutely no recollection of anything about Jerry. I remember Jerry Cooper being on the [DC Democratic] State Committee, but that's all I remember.

BK: Yeah. What I remember, vividly, is practically sitting in your lap at that election, which went to thirteen ballots, to make sure that –

PS: Wasn't H.R. Crawford in that race, or was that a different race?

BK: H.R. was in it. He withdrew. And who was it that – well, anyways, it was a crowded field of candidates. We had thirteen ballots before we put –

PS: Yeah. Well, if Jerry Cooper got any votes, it was probably just maybe four votes from Ward 1.

BK: I don't know. I can't remember.

PS: See, and I don't – it's funny how I do not recall. I'm not denying –

BK: No, no.

PS: I'm not denying it, it's just I have no recollection. I guess if my support was – it was only because it was a Ward 1 thing.

BK: Yeah. So were you at the Harambee House on the night of the election, of the primary? Remember, we all went to the Harambee House for the – or there was a celebration at the Harambee House?

PS: Which, I don't even remember where it was, so I probably wasn't there. Where would it have been? I might have gone to the Ward 1 celebration then, because Dave Clark would have won from Ward 1.

BK: Oh, yes, of course, for the primary.

PS: Uh-huh.

BK: But I don't think it was –

PS: And I wasn't a Dave Clark supporter.

BK: And it wasn't his year.

PS: No. So I don't know.

BK: I don't know. Maybe it was.

PS: This is terrible. I should leave, because I'm not doing very well.

BK: No, that's all right. That's all right. Then after the inaugural, did you –

PS: I was actually a part of the transition team. I forget which – or one of the committees.

He had 8,000 committees, I remember that. [An exaggeration] And I forget which committee I served on, but I served on one of the committees and, of course, being the type of person that I was, I'm sure I attended every single meeting.

BK: I'm sure you did.

PS: But, of course, I can't remember which.

BK: Was that the first inaugural or was that the –

PS: Probably the first that I got appointed to.

BK: And then after the –

PS: And at some point, I got appointed to the Human Relations Commission, but that was, I think, quite a bit later on. Boy, my years are vague.

BK: So you served on the Human Rights Commission?

PS: Yeah, it was called the Human Rights Commission.

BK: During the first administration?

PS: I don't think the first administration.

BK: And did you ever serve on any of the other boards or commissions?

PS: You know what? It must have been his last administration. Yes. That's true. I did serve prior to that. I served on the Board of Appeals and Review.

BK: Did you indeed?

PS: Uh-huh.

BK: Big deal.

PS: So that might have been the first or early in the second.

BK: Okay. Why were you particularly attracted to Marion and to his campaign?

PS: Well, he had energy and he was, I thought, very progressive.

BK: Indeed.

PS: In those days, he was pro-gay rights. I know he switched later, probably to serve his constituents in Ward 8.

BK: Yeah, but that was an aberration which he regretted, I believe. But you're right, he did.

And what do you consider to be the contribution that Marion made to the city?

PS: I think one of the greatest contributions is he certainly brought a lot of activists into the government. As a matter of fact, I said one of the weaknesses was that there was not a new generation of activists after him.

BK: Yeah.

PS: But the strength was he brought a lot of community activists, so we had a lot of people who understood the grass roots and what was happening in the community.

BK: Yeah, I agree with you. Did you continue your friendship with him and your support of him throughout his political career?

PS: Well, certainly, the first and second term. I started seeing some problems by the third term.

BK: Yeah. But did you continue to vote for him? Do you remember?

PS: I think I voted for him every time, but I became a little less active. I focused more on Ward 1 politics, and probably some of the at-large races. Boy, I'm forgetting a lot of this.

BK: And you continued to work on Capitol Hill, did you?

PS: Yes. I worked on Capitol Hill from 1970 until 1995, when the Republicans took over, but I fortunately had my twenty-five years so I could retire. And then I stayed in DC for seven more years.

BK: Doing?

PS: Being the activist that I always had been. And then I moved out and because an activist in Delaware.

BK: I see. Well, that's good. Well, Peter, thank you very much indeed. That was an extraordinary time and you were certainly part of it, and we appreciate your participation.

PS: Thank you.

[End of Interview]